

Transcript

Q: Could you introduce yourself and your role in the implementation of the process?

A: Yeah, so I was appointed as the independent evaluator, contracted with Birmingham Museums Trust. I found out about the opportunity through Lucy from DemocracyNext, who were acting as advisors to the process, since it was the first time Birmingham Museums Trust had run something like this.

There was some persuasion from DemocracyNext to even include an independent evaluation. Then the tender came out, and it was a very quick turnaround — I applied, found out within about a week, and then the first session was the week after. So it was very fast, but yeah, I was the independent evaluator.

Q: What was the main goal of the process or problem it aimed to solve?

A: So the core question was: *what does Birmingham need and want from its museums now and in the future, and what should Birmingham Museums Trust do to make these things happen?*

The aim was to produce a set of recommendations to answer that. One key thing is that Birmingham Museums Trust includes nine different venues, not just one museum, so it was quite a broad and complex question.

Some participants felt the focus ended up being more on Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery rather than the other venues, which made it harder to fully answer the question across all museums within the limited number of sessions.

Q: Were there any local conditions that shaped the impact of the process?

A: Yeah, definitely. At the time, Birmingham City Council had financial issues and had effectively declared bankruptcy within the recent period before the process.

There were also visible issues like rubbish collection problems and wider cost-of-living pressures, so there was this perception in the media of the city struggling financially.

At the same time, citizens were being brought together to discuss museums, which created some tension — people were aware of that contrast.

But I didn't see any negative press about the process itself. That concern mostly came from within the process, with participants acknowledging the difficult context.

Also, Birmingham Museums Trust was largely self-funded at the time, although they later received government funding. It's unclear, but possible, that the citizens' jury contributed to that.

Section 2: Design and Organisation

Q: Who organised and designed the process?

A: The process was designed and facilitated by an organisation called Shared Future, which is a community interest company.

They are independent and specialise in facilitation. Birmingham Museums Trust didn't have prior experience running a citizens' jury, so my impression is that they largely left the design and delivery to Shared Future.

Q: Was it influenced more by government or independent actors?

A: Definitely independent. There was no real involvement from government actors.

Even at the final launch event, where recommendations were presented, there was very little attendance from MPs or local government, despite them being invited.

Q: What resources or budget were involved?

A: I can't give exact figures, but I would describe it as a small to medium budget.

Some facilitators actually mentioned feeling underpaid, which suggests resource constraints.

Q: Why was this model chosen instead of open participation?

A: The main reason is representativeness. With open participation, you get self-selection — people who have time, interest, or resources.

With a citizens' jury, using sortition, you aim to create a more representative sample of the population.

Also, participants are compensated, which helps include people who otherwise couldn't take part.

Another important difference is commitment — participants stay involved across multiple sessions, which creates a stronger sense of engagement and shared experience compared to one-off participation.

Section 3: Recruitment and Inclusion

Q: How were participants recruited and selected?

A: Participants were recruited using sortition — so invitations were sent out widely, and then people responded and were selected to reflect the population.

The exact numbers are in the report, but it involved sending out thousands of invitations.

Q: How were diversity and inclusion ensured?

A: In terms of visible diversity — ethnicity, religion, age — there was a strong effort to ensure representation.

For example, participants with specific needs were accommodated, such as providing prayer spaces. One participant mentioned feeling very comfortable despite initially feeling self-conscious about wearing religious clothing.

Facilitating organisations are generally very good at managing inclusion and making people feel comfortable.

Q: Were any groups underrepresented?

A: Yes, but not necessarily in the usual way people think.

The main missing group was middle-aged people with full-time jobs and family commitments.

These individuals often don't have time to participate, and they're less motivated by financial incentives. So you tend to get younger people or retirees instead.

So while representation may look good on paper, there's still a gap in terms of life-stage representation.

Section 4: Process and Deliberation

Q: Can you describe the process structure?

A: It involved around five or six sessions, alternating between in-person and online.

Each session built towards developing final recommendations.

A key feature was that after the final session, participants had time to reflect and then vote on the recommendations before they were presented publicly.

That's important because it allows for more considered outputs, rather than rushing decisions in the final session.

Q: What were participants able to control or influence?

A: Participants had influence over selecting the key topics they wanted to focus on early in the process.

Based on those choices, facilitators brought in relevant experts for later sessions.

Beyond that, their influence came through their discussions and contributions, which shaped the final recommendations.

Section 5: Power and Decision-Making

Q: Were the recommendations binding or advisory?

A: They were definitely advisory.

That was made clear from the beginning, and Birmingham Museums Trust openly stated that some recommendations would not be feasible to implement.

Q: Did participants have real power?

A: It depends how you define power.

From one perspective, power could be measured by how many recommendations are implemented. From that view, it may seem limited.

But from the participants' perspective, many felt empowered simply by being involved and having their voices heard.

So there's a distinction between actual decision-making power and perceived empowerment.

Section 6: Outcomes

Q: Were the recommendations implemented?

A: Some may have been, but there is no clear public data on this.

There hasn't been transparent follow-up or reporting on implementation, which is itself an important issue.

Section 7: Evaluation

Q: How well did the process achieve inclusion and participation?

A: It was strong in bringing together diverse groups who wouldn't normally interact.

However, there were some dropouts, which raises questions about whether the process fully supported all participants throughout.

Also, facilitators were sometimes not fully open when asked about these issues, which made evaluation more difficult.

Q: How transparent was the process?

A: Transparency during the process was generally good, but weaker afterwards.

There's a lack of transparency around implementation of recommendations.

Also, participants relied on facilitator summaries between sessions, without access to the raw data, which could affect how accurately their contributions were represented.

Q: How transferable is the model?

A: It is highly transferable because facilitators are not subject-matter experts — they are experts in facilitation.

So it can be applied to different sectors and locations.

However, scaling it up is difficult without using digital tools or technology.

Section 8: Critical Reflection

Q: What were the biggest weaknesses of the process?

A: One weakness is participant retention — some people dropped out before the end.

Another issue is how discussions are captured. Without recordings, facilitators rely on note-taking, which can lead to loss of detail or misrepresentation.

There's also a risk if facilitators don't fully understand participant contributions, which can affect how those ideas are recorded.

Q: What would you change if the process was run again?

A: I would introduce more use of digital tools, such as recording and transcribing discussions, to improve accuracy and transparency.

I would also improve planning and diversity of expert speakers, ensuring they are secured earlier.

Finally, I would be more willing to include controversial or challenging topics, such as colonial histories, rather than avoiding them.